

# FROM STRUGGLE KNOWLEDGE AND MOVEMENT LEARNING TO THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

**Aziz Choudry**

*McGill University, Canada*

**ABSTRACT:** There is renewed interest in illuminating ways in which collective social struggles can be key sites of learning and knowledge production, analysis, tools for social change – and theory. While it should not be contentious for adult educators to acknowledge the various forms of significant learning that occur in such contexts, there has often been a disconnect between scholarly literature and the learning in the movement spaces which they theorize. This article draws from the author's organizing and education work in social movements, activist groups and non-governmental organization (NGO) networks and from his research and teaching as an academic engaged with the dynamics, tensions and possibilities of learning in social and political activist contexts, critical adult education and social change. Further, in reflecting upon learning and knowledge in social movements, it discusses the place of such struggle knowledge in non-formal adult education/popular education milieus and university classrooms.

## **Introduction**

This article emerges from reflections on two sets of interconnected experiences. The first arises from my organizing and education work in social movements, activist groups and non-governmental organization (NGO) networks in Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the broader Asia-Pacific region, and internationally. The second derives from my research and teaching as an academic in a

Canadian university interested in the dynamics, tensions and possibilities of learning in social and political activist contexts, critical adult education and social change. Holst (2002) argued that the learning that occurs and the knowledge produced in movements is often dismissed by adult education scholars as ‘political’, rather than considered for what it reveals about these locations as significant sites of radical adult education. While eschewing a simplistic romanticized notion of activism, movement learning and knowledge production, I suggest that collective social struggles can be key sites of learning and knowledge production analysis, tools for social change and theory. In this article, I use the term ‘struggle knowledge’ to include forms of learning and knowledge production, both informal and non-formal, which occur in the course of social, political and environmental struggles. Finally, this article discusses the place of ‘struggle knowledge’ in non-formal adult education/popular education milieus and university classrooms. What bearing can lessons from social struggles have on teaching and learning in today’s universities?

### **Lessons in the streets: Learning in and from the Quebec student strike**

In thinking about these questions, my mind often goes back to the 2012 Quebec student strike, when, alongside the groundswell of support and sympathy for this cause in some circles, there was no shortage of commentary about how the many thousands of striking university and college students across the province allegedly did not really care about their education, did not want to learn, and were wasting their lives by not attending classes. These opinions

were found not only in the mass media but circulated widely in the Faculty of Education in which I work and across the broader university. Although the strike was waged against university tuition increases and the further commodification of education, an underlying assumption behind such comments was that the status quo was working fine for everybody. An assumption which was repeated here was that education and learning happens only through formal programmes in institutional settings like schools, colleges and universities. Yet the idea that learning occurs beyond classes in formal institutions is hardly radical and is accepted in much of the writing on adult education including from humanist, experiential, community, feminist, workplace learning positions, which all agree that learning occurs outside the classroom. Further, these notions are at odds with what many people experience in their lives, in the 'how', 'where', 'when', 'why' and 'what' they learn. In this particular case, these assumptions were also deeply disconnected from what was actually happening across Quebec for many who participated in this movement. Long-term efforts at coordination and education by student organizers and their allies, informed by lessons from earlier phases of Quebec student activism built and sustained this major mobilization. These organizing and education efforts occurred in the general assemblies in which students had organized the strike, debating ideas, making decisions, voting, building strategies and solidarity.

They took place in teach-ins and other forums organized by striking students and in coalition work with other communities and movements to build connections and common fronts of struggle. This mobilization and

education also spread to the neighbourhood marches, the nightly banging of pots and pans - “*les casseroles*”, and popular assemblies which sprung up across the province. Learning and knowledge production also happened in anti-racist organizing within the student movement itself, challenging racism and the ongoing marginalization of many racialized students in Quebec.

During that period, there was a lot happening in the streets, every day and every night – incrementally, incidentally, informally, through talking, exchanging, marching together, claiming and creating space, building solidarities and trust, confronting state power – particularly when faced with the large and often violent policing operations which were mobilized against the student protests, and draconian restrictions which Quebec’s provincial government imposed on protests as the movement grew- learning of the kind that could not take place in a classroom or a workshop.

Thus while there is ongoing debate over the political outcomes of the Quebec student movement, for many (over 100 consecutive) days and nights, demonstrations throughout Montreal were, in a very real sense, ‘universities of the streets’, full of rich discussions, conversations and exchanges. I am convinced that for many of those involved, these constituted important experiences in which some profound learning took place, and, anecdotally at least, that seems to be the case for most of those students that I have spoken with over the past two years. It may be too early to assess the long-term effects of engagement in the student movement for the many thousands who took part. Through participation in

the demonstrations, in striking student-initiated teach-ins and hearing from students about their experiences in their assemblies and other deliberative and decision-making spaces, I witnessed a great deal of informal and non-formal learning.

Activist research, popular education and the incidental learning in the streets and in grappling with internal movement dynamics had played important roles in providing organizers with tools to argue against the tuition hike and commodification of education. Encounters between the student movement and other communities, movements, and trade unions were also important educative sites and moments, and facilitated learning about broader social, economic and political issues around which people organize. Probably some of the most profound learning occurred in the midst of police violence unleashed on a regular basis against students: these confrontations with the power of the state have made a deep impact on many who were its targets.

Recent student movements in Quebec and Chile, migrant justice struggles, and anti-war, anti-globalization/global justice mobilizations and movements throughout the world have certainly contributed to renewed academic and public interest in social movements and political, social and environmental activism. So too have uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, Indigenous Peoples', climate justice and other struggles. Yet many people –including some academics and university students – still tend to see activism as practice, and learning, education, theorizing, knowledge production and research

as occurring elsewhere –in schools, colleges and universities.

### **Learning in/from the struggle: social movement learning**

The Quebec student strike is just one recent reminder of the significance of learning in social movements. Is there a neat and tidy way to tell the story of social movement learning, let alone its relation to more formal kinds of adult education and the academy? I think not. While a comprehensive overview of the literature on social movement learning is outside the scope of this article, as Foley (1999), Kelley (2002), Flacks (2004), and Bevington and Dixon (2005) have argued, a wealth of knowledge can be brought forth from within social struggles in order to analyze them, to illuminate aspects of learning and power relations, as well as to question broader social, economic and political structures, processes and institutions. In saying this, I am not arguing that all learning, evaluation, and analysis emerging from various forms of organizing are necessarily rigorous or adequate. Indeed, a critical analysis of learning in ‘progressive’ movements necessitates looking critically at claims that are made about it in relation to actual practices, and in particular the ways these are experienced by racialized people, Indigenous Peoples, working class and other socially or economically marginalized communities. Newman (2000) stated that:

everyday experience and learning can as easily reproduce ways of thinking and acting which support the often oppressive status quo as it can produce

recognitions that enable people to critique and challenge the existing order. And even when learning is emancipatory it is not so in some linear, development sense: it is complex and contradictory, shaped as it is by intrapersonal, interpersonal and broader social forces (pp. 275-276).

As Austin (2013) has noted, a primary measure of a social movement's validity "is the degree to which society's most marginalized and dispossessed are part of and genuinely reflected in the social vision proposed by the movement" (p. 12). Movements along with the learning and knowledge that they produce, tend to be contested and sometimes downright messy terrains.

Much can be learnt from movements about the ways people learn, strategies for social change, and broader power relations within societies and the world. Although there is a considerable body of scholarly literature on adult education and learning, relatively few attempts have been made to understand and theorize learning (especially informal learning) and knowledge production through involvement in social action. This learning and knowledge is not only relevant to participants in movements and mobilizations or those who study them. As Holford (1995) wrote that to study:

the organizational knowledge of social movements is, in short, to study a key site of interaction between learning, knowledge and society (p. 105).

What is the relationship of theory to knowledge arising from experience in social movement struggles? Problems with levels of abstraction and decontextualization of

thinkers and ideas from their contexts, the overextension of their ideas in the process of theorizing, and the divorce of theory from the material and social world in which people live and struggle, are often encountered (Foley, 1999; Choudry and Kapoor, 2010). Social movements and the learning that occurs in and through them is often not linear and takes place in multiple ways incidentally, informally and incrementally in the course of struggles and through non-formal forms of popular education.

What makes popular education “popular?” A Canadian Union of Postal Workers (2009) training manual, which draws from US nonviolence trainer George Lakey’s Teaching for Change work, described popular education as the kind of education that seeks “to transform power relations in society, relationships between teacher and learner, and relationships among learners. In this sense it is radically democratic.” Boughton (2013) has suggested that popular education teaches people to

study their own experiences in order to uncover the analysis and the resources that they need to move from where they are to where they want to be (p. 253).

Popular education encompasses a far greater range of traditions, approaches, and techniques than I can do justice to here and can be a powerful force for bringing people together, educating and building knowledge for action. Through many forms of popular education, it is hoped that participants experience, reflect, generalize, and apply learning in their everyday struggles for change.

Scandrett (2012) has connected the non-formal, intentional forms of non-formal learning such as popular



education practices with the incidental learning that occurs in movements. For example, he suggests that movement encounters with other social movement actors are examples of incidental learning which has occurred informally:

through political praxis and engaging with others in struggle, but also, significantly, through 'discursive encounters' with other social movements. It is suggested that a dialogical process occurs between the militant particularism of the local movement and the abstraction offered by contact with wider social movements, which allows for a framing of experience and learning to occur within such frames. The discursive encounter is not the process of learning but rather provides a structured framework for such dialogue to occur, much as popular education is able to, usually more effectively. Such a dialogical process may be said to be similar to structured popular education in the selection and construction of 'really useful knowledge' through dialogue between knowledge borne of collective experience and practice, and abstract, analytical and canonical knowledge (Scandrett, 2012, p.45).

Scandrett's discussion seems pertinent to explicating the politics, dynamics and processes of knowledge, learning and theorizing in networks of community organizations and communities as well as national and international encounters and alliances among different movements. Indeed, some student activists from the 2012 Quebec student strike cite the ways in which encounters with Indigenous Peoples opposing resource extraction by

corporations on their territories were important sites of learning which encouraged them to think about the connections between struggles over tuition increases and the commodification of education with market-driven forms of colonialism in present-day Canada.

Lynd (2009) held that

there are examples of homegrown, close-to-the-earth kind of theory that evolved directly from folks' experience in organizing ... [but that] ... there is another kind of theory that is needed, too (p. 40).

For example, "in the absence of a theory to explain what is going on economically the best-intentioned, most grassroots and democratic sort of movement is likely to flounder." It may be useful to think through how to effectively mediate between theorizing which arises from experiential knowledge and theoretical concepts. How can such concepts be applied to concrete experiences in struggles to help reorganize understandings in ways that support effective strategy and action? I will return to these questions to discuss how they might play out in a university setting.

The theories of learning and knowledge which make most sense to me are generally Marxist ones which help to map social relations, envision horizons of political possibilities, and inform a framework of analysis with which to understand the structural conditions of social life in order to change them (e.g. Allman, 2010; Carpenter and Mojab, 2012; Youngman, 1986). But in terms of putting this into practice, the ways forward are not always so clear. On the one hand, in the course of many social struggles, it

can be difficult to reflect and think beyond immediate threats, campaigns or goals. Kelley (2002) has suggested that sometimes:

the conditions of daily life, of everyday oppressions, of survival, not to mention the temporary pleasures accessible to most of us, render much of our imagination inert. We are constantly putting out fires, responding to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present (p.11).

Yet on the other hand, as Newman (2012) reminded us, conflict can be good for us. Unless we panic, we are often at our most imaginative when face to face with a vigorous opponent. Under pressure, we go looking for, and often find, original responses (p.45).

I am reminded of the Quebec student strike and the creativity of many activists when facing down and denouncing police violence, and harsh, anti-democratic anti-protest legislation from a provincial government determined to increase tuition fees and crush the huge movement, as well as moments in other struggles where inventive approaches to action and education have facilitated building consciousness and learning in the course of confrontation with the power of state and capital. In other contexts, in the course of struggles to improve their lives, such as fighting for access to water and electricity, people can connect these concerns to a broader understanding, and systemic analysis of processes like privatization, and the power of state and capital.

## **Learning and social change**

In both community/movement spaces and in the circuits of higher education, claims are often made about the inherent connection between social justice and education. Yet many of these are made in the context of liberal projects which aim to domesticate and discipline more radical ideas and positions, set parameters of acceptable dissent and critique and impose them (Choudry and Shragge, 2011), and/or are merely abstract pedagogic or discursive interventions disconnected from people's everyday activities and their experiences of living and struggling against social, political and economic injustice.

I believe that learning about injustices, their causes and connections - that is to say, awareness alone- is insufficient to bring about change. In both activist and academic contexts, many claims proliferate about the relationship between education (whether deemed to be 'popular' or not) and transformation/liberation/change which are very disconnected from any form of collective social struggle or programme for change. Newman's (2012) challenges to the concept of, and scholarship on "transformative learning" struck a chord with me. Newman contested the idea that 'transformative learning' exists as an identifiable phenomenon, in spite of an expansive literature on the subject and a multitude of courses, classes, seminars and workshops which contain the phrase in their titles. The significance of the context and historical moments in which particular instances and processes of informal learning in social action, popular education programmes, or, indeed, university courses are located cannot be overlooked. The broader social and political

context in communities and societies which they are located in is relevant to the capacity of learning/education to contribute to social change.

Barndt (1991) has documented the renowned literacy crusade of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua which was both a campaign to significantly reduce illiteracy in the country and a central plank of the revolution. Boughton (2013) reminded us that popular education, in its European form at least, dates back to 18<sup>th</sup> century radicalism and became integral to the international socialist movement via 19<sup>th</sup> century Chartism. Looking back on history, US adult literacy educators Gordon and Ramdeholl (2010) suggested:

During the civil rights movement, the citizenship schools (in many ways, literacy programs) played a key role in bringing people into action by helping them acquire the tools to organize. In 2010, in the absence of such a broad popular movement, the potential for literacy programs to contribute to those social movements is undeniably more limited (p.33).

Arguably, this is also true of labour education programmes in periods when unions have turned their back on social movement styles of organizing. Historically, radical traditions of adult education and movement-building have often been inextricably connected. In recent decades, the fragmentation and specialization of tasks and activities within movements and community organizations, often attributable to broader processes of NGOization – the professionalization and institutionalization of political and social action – have severely constrained their radical potential, and obscured important lessons from the past

(see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Choudry and Kapoor, 2013; Kamat 2004 on NGOs and NGOization).

Notwithstanding powerful accounts of popular education and learning in social movements, I am unconvinced that a great deal of significant learning and change occurs through epiphanies or “a-ha” moments. Discussing Daloz’s (2000) study of 100 ‘socially responsible people’, Newman (2012) approvingly noted that Daloz “made ‘very clear’ that although a single event may catalyze a shift or a particular story might dramatize a transformation, closer examination reveals that change or shift was long in coming and its possibility prepared for in myriad ways, generally across years (Daloz, p. 105). Thus, Newman concludes that learning that engages with the consciousness may have no discernible ending or beginning. This understanding is also consistent with analyses which highlight the incremental nature of building social movements, protests and mobilizations. As Scott Neigh (2012) reminded us,

Even the most collective and public moments of resistance to oppression and exploitation are made possible because they are built upon countless small ones. They are built from many small meetings that are sometimes fun and sometimes boring and sometimes frustrating. They are made up of conversations, of taking your lunch hour to hand out leaflets on a downtown street corner, of lots and lots of emails and phone calls (p.198).

In recognizing these smaller, sometimes imperceptible moments of action and learning, we should not underestimate their role in incrementally building people's confidence through the sharing of individual and collective moments of learning and action together and reflection. In her critical reflections on popular education schools in the historically marginalized communities of Cape Town, Von Kotze (2012) highlighted the importance of '[c]reative collective experiences" which, she argues:

can help break through from seeing others as barriers rather than essential allies and make conscious the potential of solidarity in action (p.109).

She wrote of the significance of encouraging participants to draw on their individual creativity in order to produce a collective moment that might prefigure relationships and ways of production that recall the past and prefigure the future. For her:

the shift from mere critical to anticipatory consciousness can instill the hope and determination necessary for assuming agency but it requires a slow process to feed and develop a fertile imagination (p.104).

In sum, popular education has long been linked to the idea of activism and building collective spaces and movements in which ordinary people can see themselves as knowledge producers and agents of change rather than a model where 'expert' educators and thinkers arrive with a special bag of tricks, insights, and exercises to deliver teaching and analysis and then move on to the next engagement. In an era of 'generation NGO" and the entrenchment of the non-

profit industrial complex', the community sector and some activist groups often work with adult educators, or trainer / consultants who draw on 'adult education' practices and techniques but do so in ways that are not informed by either radical education traditions connected to organizing for social change.

Reflecting on tensions and possibilities within labour education in Canada and the US, union educators Bleakney and Morrill (2010) stated:

There are enough unpleasant facts and human squalor that if information transfer was the only thing required (or the banking model, as Freire put it), we should already have reached a point of widespread rebellion. But in our experience, participants who become mere receivers of unpleasant facts can become disempowered or feel more hopeless about prospects for change than to begin with. Workers not permitted to be participants in critical reflection on their reality are not likely to be agents for change. Resistance is personal and social and requires slipping outside the 'quantitative box' into which we so easily, unconsciously, and compliantly fit. The process of using anger and action is valuable in worker-based trainings. However, when workers remain in the anger stage, worker-educators have done no favors to the transformative process. Indeed, resolutions to problems have been contracted out to union advocates, thus reinforcing the model of disempowerment and union paternalism, no matter how well intentioned. Facilitators must aim to assist participants in transforming rage into hope. With



hope, action can follow. What is the purpose of worker education if not to assist people to act on their collective wisdom and experience? (p. 144).

More broadly, the same question can be asked of popular education. Popular education can work through using tools which engage people emotionally, move people physically--and in other ways--not least of which is encouraging them to move past a sense of isolation, a culture of complaint and an enhanced capacity to describe the many problems we face, to one of action and agency. But ultimately, such education practice does not just hinge on an educator's mastery of a particular pedagogy; people also need collective contexts in which to organize for change.

## **Pedagogy**

Many educators, in formal and non-formal contexts spend considerable time talking and writing about pedagogy. There are many initiatives for sharing recipes, formulas and approaches to follow to try to bring about truly effective popular education. Harley (2012) has criticized the

strong thrust even within the tradition of radical education that assumes that some kind of radical teacher *who knows more* (and some kind of radical pedagogy) is absolutely necessary to 'conscientise' or 'transform' those who are not thinking, or not thinking well enough, or not thinking critically enough (p.18).

What are the pros and cons of more directive approaches to non-formal learning and more (purportedly, at least) open or emergent processes that arise in the moment, so to

speak? In this neoliberal age, where so much is being restructured and scaled back in the name of efficiency, including pressures on union education and community education, there are some real dangers in persisting with ideas that emphasize the 'expertise' of an educator rather than the importance of taking or building space to come together, build, share and augment knowledge together and act collectively.

In a sense, in reflecting on many years of activist education and learning, and in thinking through the academic discussions of pedagogy which I have taken part in, the more I am convinced that often, 'less' can be 'more'. Boughton (1997) cited a section of the Teachers Handbook used by the Communist Party of Australia's Marx Schools of the 1940s, which explained:

Students learn best when they figure it out for themselves rather than being told.....That class is the best where the tutor doesn't have to talk too much, and tell too much (p.14).

This is not to suggest that the person who plays the role of the 'educator' does nothing. Educators and facilitators set up space to do something even if they do not talk much. Educators can plan to do less, to help support a kind of emergent design which comes out of the needs, relevancies and priorities of those with whom s/he is working. Tensions abound in the way in which sincere critiques of 'banking' models of education do not always prevent educators consciously or unconsciously replicating these in popular education practice.

Over the last three decades, I have been fortunate to share powerful instances of popular education, in several

countries, movements, organizing and institutional educational contexts. Yet we often encounter a real tension in progressive politics and among educators between believing that everyone can think and should be listened to, on the one hand, and viewing that the oppressed are not yet educated to be able to think through their own struggles and to organize. As Bowl and Tobias (2012) note, even for adult educators deeply appreciative of Freire's critique of 'banking' forms of education, there can be a strong pull towards didacticism. In part, they argue, this can arise from educators being more comfortable reproducing their own learning experiences, and in part, from the resistance they encounter to more dialogic forms of learning from those with whom they work (i.e. the 'students') because of their being accustomed to more didactic sorts of teaching. Alongside this, in many activist contexts, older, more seasoned activists and/or staffers may turn to banking models of teaching in workshops and other spaces, sometimes reflecting informal hierarchies within these spaces.

One pertinent example about how ordinary people know more than they are often given credit for immediately comes to mind. In 1997, I travelled with a trade unionist to several worksites in small New Zealand towns, en route to address a public meeting on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), the stalled international treaty among OECD governments that many critics described as a charter of rights and privileges for transnational corporations. At a food processing plant, I was invited to talk with workers about globalization, as an activist/expert from outside. Even in our short amount of time together, it was clear that many workers there were critically reading

their world, with a clear sense of the impacts of privatization and deregulation in their community, with concrete examples from what they observed happening in their town. This came through just in asking a couple of questions and a go-round. The workers produced knowledge and an analysis about their own situation from their own experiences that was different from what I could provide as an activist educator and campaigner coming in from the outside. This kind of community mapping based on ordinary people's knowledge can be a powerful resource for action for social change.

These are the moments that feel most satisfying to me: you are meant to be a resource person, educator, workshop facilitator, but you feel it doesn't particularly matter if you're there or not. People are talking, engaging, sharing what they know, learning from each other, building their analysis and strategy together. Lynd (2009, p. 75) describes the beginnings of the celebrated Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) in Tennessee that supported trade unions and the civil rights struggles through social justice leadership training. Myles Horton, the main founder of Highlander called a meeting to address community needs and concerns during the Depression in the Appalachian mountains, to which some people walked barefoot:

As the meeting was about to begin, Horton realized that he had nothing consequential to suggest. In panic and desperation he said: 'Let's go around the circle and see what ideas people bring with them.' They did so. A program materialized. The Highlander style of education emerged from this experience.

Such experiences happen on a daily basis but are not necessarily documented. Systematizing popular education and movement learning experiences remains a challenge.

If we claim that what we are doing is participatory, non-hierarchical, learner-centred, emancipatory, and transformative then it must be ... right? Yet sometimes what passes for popular education in some activist contexts can feel like an empty shell when it essentially consists of being talked at by academics, NGO, community group or union staffers and activists in a training or workshop. This can also mean panels of “experts” who are activists, instead of academics, or officials, that include a q and a or discussion period where the educator or panelists are treated as the authorities. Or there can be the rituals of organizing spaces, participatory approaches, and popular education, empty of the political content. Ellsworth (1989) wrote about the illusion of equality arising from notions of student/learner empowerment and dialogue which can nonetheless hide the essentially authoritarian teacher/student relationship.

She takes issue with vague, abstracted notions and claims about empowering learners and transformative learning in classroom settings. The same neoliberalism which so many movements and organizations contest has impacted them, and all of us, deeply. Notwithstanding the decline in funding for adult and community education, the small industry of trainers, educators, facilitators and consultants and the growth of forms of social change entrepreneurialism that are surely an offshoot of the ‘non-profit industrial complex’ (Smith, 2007). While there remain vibrant popular education practices at work--for example in

migrant and immigrant community organizing--these are often at the margins, say of labour/women's movements.

I have watched the undermining and increasing professionalization and institutionalization of popular education across a number of sectors and contexts. Are these trainers, educators and consultants who draw on adult education practices and techniques as well as the growth of forms of entrepreneurialism an offshoot of the 'non-profit industrial complex' which has adopted business models of funding and evaluation of activities? I think this reflects broader trends of NGOization and the restructuring of the community sector, rather than increased funds or resources, and that this trend also has impacts on more critical activist groups which are not funded. With the erasure of histories about organizing, and connections to radical education and informal learning in the struggle, it becomes difficult to push back against these forces.

While often invoking the spirit of Freire, popular education, activist education, and labour education can be delinked from its histories in struggles, and connections to struggle knowledge, and elements of it reconfigured as techniques that can be used in the interests of domination and control. As Bleakney and Morrill (2009) argue, some union bureaucracies (and, by extension their counterparts in the community sector) view education as ways to keep control over memberships rather than as an emancipatory or organizing process. Today, popular education techniques and language can be found in corporate boardrooms and government departments all over the world.

On the other hand, some movements, for example, Brazil's Movimento Sem Terra (MST) – the Landless Rural

Workers Movement (Zibechi, 2008; Tarlau, Zimmerman de Moraes, Witcel and Thapliyal, 2014) have independently systematized their popular education work to try to maximize its impact within struggles for change (see Kane, 2012, for other examples in Latin America).

There are also questions to consider about how, and what accounts of popular/critical adult education are documented. Writing about adult education, Coben (1998) warned of the dangers of privileging written, published accounts over:

the spoken and unspoken lived experience of adult educators and students. Often, exciting, innovative practice remains unknown to anyone outside the immediate circle of those engaged in it. Innovative interpretations of Gramsci's and Freire's ideas may be being worked out every day in different areas of adult education practice, but if they are not recorded they are not available for others to share insights and debate ends and means. The work that is researched, written up, presented at conferences or submitted for assessment toward a degree, and the even smaller amount of writing that is published, is a small and not necessarily representative sample of a much larger enterprise (pp. 6-7).

Given the competing pressures on them, and other priorities, it can be very hard for movement activists and educators to find time to document their own practice. Perhaps this is one task in which engaged students and faculty in universities can play useful support roles, not

least when activist educators find spaces to critically reflect upon their experiences in graduate programmes, for example.

Tensions remain around how critical educators practice and see their roles. If, as Alexander (1990) has suggested, there is an

unresolved tension between our recognition of the reality that teachers/educators are different from their students by virtue of their theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and our warning on the other hand against the 'demagogy' of pseudo-participatory methods (pp. 66-67),

how can this, therefore, be navigated in practice? How can the learning that occurs be understood and assessed? How can the learning be identified and named, especially when it is embedded in other activities and sites which are not often thought of as educational settings? Other challenges relate to how the knowledge people already have can be augmented or nurtured by/into new knowledge that will be relevant for action for social change. Many people have important experiences and insights to draw from, it is not always possible to understand how best to activate the things that people know, encourage to share, articulate them.

There are tensions about the value of the knowledge and learning, tensions around how this is theorized and how the theoretical insights are articulated. Is theoretical work only recognized as such when it takes particular forms? Does it only occur when we create or apply categories and typologies to generalize certain



observations? Or are there other forms? Foley (1999) has examined the incidental learning that takes place in a variety of social struggles. Foley argued that to do this analysis “one needs to write case studies of learning in struggle, making explanatory connections between the broad political and economic context, micro-politics, ideologies, discourses and learning” (p. 132). What is often missing in much of the theoretical literature on critical adult education is precisely the texture, dynamics and contradictions of learning/action and even messiness which inevitably arises from experiences grounded in the day-to-day dynamics of struggles of actual people. Just as social activism and all forms of human activity can be contradictory, so too there are tensions in both the practice and theory of learning and education within them which are not easily resolved. However, this should not deter us from trying to better understand and learn from them.

### **Into the university classroom**

So what lessons can those working, learning, and teaching in formal education settings--schools, universities, colleges--draw from non-formal and informal movement learning? Over time many have maintained an acute, scathing critique of the function and impact of the dominant education system and its institutions. Others have criticized schooling for reproducing rather than addressing social and economic inequalities linked to class, race and gender relations. Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that the repressive and unequal aspects of schooling derive from the need to supply a labour force compatible with the social relations of capitalist

production. Other scholars since then have urged that scholarship on schooling re-engage with Marx (e.g. Cole, 2008; Anyon, 2011).

Many educators, coming from a range of political and philosophical traditions, who teach and work in formal educational settings are attentive to how teaching and learning there does not meet the needs of many students. Some strive to 'mix up' the way education is delivered in both non-formal and formal education contexts, using or adapting popular education techniques which acknowledge that people have different learning styles, that not everyone learns from reading textbooks, course-packs and online materials or by being lectured at for a class period. This however does not necessarily mean that educators take action for change beyond how they talk about learning.

There are many pressures on education today-- particularly the focus on "standards" and "outcomes," in an increasingly commodified sector, reflecting the neoliberal imperatives of the economies in which they exist. Perhaps schools and universities need to learn from these experiences precisely because pedagogical experimentation and approaches to and practices of education and learning outside of formal education contexts have been borne from the shackles of the old system. Nurturing spaces for some sense of collectivity in university classrooms in campuses which value competition among students and hierarchies of authority inevitably encounters tensions and sometimes student resistance. Then there are also questions about the extent to which attempts to reshape dominant approaches

to university teaching are mere window-dressing or worse. Vio Grossi's (1983) observation is relevant here:

It is widely known that participation is sometimes allowed only to give the impression that things are managed collectively, rather than in an authoritarian way, but in fact that participation has so many limits that it helps to consolidate domination (p. 109).

Put another way, Alexander (1990) cautioned a South African audience in 1988:

...The inane nonsense that is sometimes passed off as learner-centred education even at universities has got to be exposed and disregarded for the (usually) bourgeois mystification that it actually is. We *must* learn the rudimentary lesson that in a class-divided society the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominating classes and that 'education' that doesn't challenge these ideas is simply reinforcing the reproduction of the *status quo*, no matter what fancy names we give it (pp, 63-64).

So far, I have tried to show some practical and historical examples of 'the radical imagination', and how learning and knowledge takes place and circulates reflexively in movement contexts. There often remain major disconnects between most formal education institutional contexts and the learning/education in practice in struggles outside. If the pedagogy of social movements is considered to be the struggle itself, with its repertoires of various collective spaces for action, reflection, learning, building, testing and augmenting knowledge, can something be gleaned from this for the university classroom? Challenging the

dominant tendency to overlook the intellectual contributions of activism, devalue or instrumentalize experiential knowledge (see Bofelo, Shah, Moodley, Cooper and Jones (2013) and Cooper and Harris (2013) on the politics of recognition of prior learning in South African higher education settings, for example), and insistence upon recognizing the lineage of ideas and theories which have been forged outside of academia, often incrementally, collectively, and informally is a start. Many people are conscientized and politicized through their experience of powerful movement mobilization which has inspired them, through experiences of solidarity or moments of conflict through which they have developed commitment, skills, and confidence. Indeed, some of the most radical critiques and understandings about our societies, our world and its dominant ideologies and power structures and visions of social change, emerge from those organizing spaces. But learning remains a messy business. It is not inevitable that learning in the course of engagement in social or political activism will lead to understandings or actions which challenge or confront oppressive systems. Such learning is often incremental, without a clear beginning and end, is not always obvious or identifiable as 'learning' per se (see Foley, 1999), necessarily linear or headed in a clear direction, and thus does not lend itself to neat categorizations or typologies much loved by scholars.

All education, and all human activity, is political. Coming to the academy later after many years in organizing, activist education and research, I have found that the worlds of struggles, past and present, are all too often constructed as being separate from and devoid of theory obscuring how theory/knowledge is created

in/produced through action/human activity. As I unexpectedly moved into a position teaching at a university I consciously followed in the footsteps of scholars with whom I had worked in movements and community organizing and who have continued to do so unapologetically. One of those people, feminist anti-racist scholar and activist, Sunera Thobani (2002) eloquently states this tradition:

I place my work within the tradition of radical, politically engaged scholarship. I have always rejected the politics of academic elitism which insist that academics should remain above the fray of political activism and use only disembodied, objectified language and a 'properly' dispassionate professorial demeanor to establish our intellectual credentials. My work is grounded in the politics, practices and languages of the various communities I come from, and the social justice movements to which I am committed (p. 5).

Those of us who entered the academy from locations in social movements and people's struggles should not need to apologize for insisting that our intellectual work continue to be grounded in, and relevant to these struggles. Intellectual rigour, the capacity for reflection, abstraction and theorizing are not necessarily well-served by those who claim neutral, scientific distance from the subject of their inquiry, or the content of what they teach. There remains much work to be done within the academy to recentre, acknowledge and critically engage with the intellectual production within movements, including the conceptual resources, visions and theory that they produce.

Moreover, notwithstanding our recognition of the role of universities in reinforcing hegemonic relations, it is possible to carve out and defend space in classes to reflect on people's lived experience and practice, whether that be struggle knowledge, experience in community organizations or campus politics, and to engage these experiences, observations, assumptions and reflections with theory – drawn from more 'conventional' forms of scholarship and 'movement/activist' accounts.

I teach a graduate seminar called "Organizing non-formal learning" which often draws students with community organizing and activist education experiences as well as school teachers. I emphasize that the "organizing" element of the course title is vitally connected to the "non-formal learning" aspect. In this class, students are expected to engage in practicums throughout the term in which some form of non-formal or informal learning – broadly understood – is present. In the past students have been able to use this space to think through dilemmas and educational/learning dimensions of an ad hoc para-legal group of arrestees preparing to defend themselves in court against charges stemming from the 2010 G-20 mobilizations in Toronto, their activism in the student movement of 2012, and time spent working on projects in a range of popular education projects in community organizations and non-governmental organizations in Montreal and beyond. Teaching at McGill University at the time of the Quebec student strike, a campus where there was a great deal of open hostility towards the student movement (and where student strikers formed a minority, unlike their peers in many of Quebec's Francophone universities and colleges at the time), was one moment

when the relations between the broader social and political moment in which our classes took place and our weekly seminars and the interconnections between the classroom and the streets could be made more visible

While the context differs from the one in which I currently teach, I find the insights from research and practice from South Africa which has looked at the ways in which struggle knowledge as a form of prior learning relates to formal learning to be helpful in thinking through the possibilities for struggle knowledge to nourish learning in university classrooms. In their case study of the Workers' College in Durban, Bofelo et al. (2013) discuss the issue of recognition of such prior learning in a programme which seeks to provide an access route to universities for those who have been historically denied the possibility of entering higher education. The College is connected to a tradition of radical worker education linked to long history of radical education against apartheid. They write:

The educational philosophy of the Workers' College is to begin with learners' *struggle knowledge*, to reflect on it, validate it through peer engagement, and link experiential knowledge to radical political theories of social change, as well as to the codified knowledge base of academia. In this process, *new knowledge* is generated with which the College aims to build an alternative knowledge base that can interact with, and enrich formal disciplinary knowledge bases, giving them greater relevance for College learners (p. 513).

As the South African authors note, elements of critical social theory, and the specialized language associated with

it, already circulate within civil society organizations and are not the sole preserve of the academy. So too, from my own experience, and in working with students who are engaged in community organizing, NGO work, or political activism, I have found that there are many such ideas, concepts and frames circulating and being taken up – critically or not - in spaces outside of the university. As in the Workers’ College example, conceptual knowledge can often be mediated through students’ experience. The role of the educator in courses such as the one I describe above can be to:

draw on the learners’ experiential knowledge, and interpret and re-contextualize this in relation to conceptual knowledge. Following this, concepts are then relocated back in the real world (Bofelo, et al, p.518) [where they can be applied – *author’s addition*].

Based on my social movement experience and work as an academic I believe that a more conscious appreciation for the ways in which people learn informally and often incidentally in the course of their participation in struggles for change, and attention to how such learning can both inform and develop in a dialogical relation with other kinds of non-formal and even classroom-based learning is very valuable.

## **Conclusion**

History teaches us that theory, knowledge and conceptual resources do not reside exclusively or even necessarily emanate from universities. Ideas and theoretical thinking circulate. Indeed grasping a clearer sense of history about



ordinary people who have theorized from their experiences in everyday world, struggles, contradictions can help to pull us back from understandings of theory which exclude their contributions and perspectives and diminish our appreciation for the myriad ways and places in which intellectual work takes place.

Activist educators and critically engaged academics have both played roles in historical rescue missions on ideas and perspectives, knowledge produced which has been inadvertently or deliberately buried or passed over as irrelevant or just 'political'. There are many rich conceptual resources from earlier struggles which are relevant to thinking through today's dilemmas, but there is also a danger of producing and reproducing formulaic approaches to change, and not attending to both the micro- and macropolitics of the world we live in today. People learn from mistakes as well as moments of apparent victory and progress.

As Von Kotze (2012) and others have suggested, people's experiences of collective struggle/learning can be powerful experiences or glimpses of other ways of doing things which both sustains commitment and opens up minds and hearts to possibilities of thinking and acting outside the parameters imposed on them. Moreover, in the course of social and political struggles, it is through action that people create experiences from which they learn – the action is what educates, the doing, reflecting on the practice is the source of new ideas, and experiences of change however that is defined.

Notwithstanding our status as people constructed as having 'expertise', and not minimizing the importance of

dialogical learning, perhaps there is an underrated and powerful pedagogical and political value in activist educators and university lecturers being prepared to spend more time listening to others. Perhaps a more difficult task is whether we can acknowledge and address attachments to explicit or more subtle understandings of educators as being saviours or keepers of special knowledge, tricks, or techniques. Educators can become very invested in the idea of being a liberator, a resource person with specialist knowledge or a valuable expert, part of a cadre somehow above the fray with special insights into strategy and future trajectories of struggles. Finally within formal education settings, there remains much potential work to be done to engage or re-engage adult education scholarship and practice with the insights, tensions, possibilities and orientations inherent in what ordinary people learn through their experiences of struggle for a better world.

## References

- Alexander, N. (1990). *Liberation pedagogy in the South African context. In Education and the struggle for national liberation in South Africa: Essays and speeches by Neville Alexander (1985-1989)*. Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers.
- Allman, P. (2010). *Critical education against global capitalism: Karl Marx and revolutionary critical education*. Rotterdam, Boston and Taipei: Sense.

- Anyon, J. (2011). *Marx and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Austin, D. (2013). *Fear of a black nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press.
- Barndt, D. (1991). *To Change This House: Popular Education Under the Sandinistas*. Toronto: Between the Lines. Co-published by the Jesuit Centre and Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action.
- Bevington, D. & Dixon, C. (2005). Movement-relevant theory: Rethinking Social Movement Scholarship and Activism. *Social Movement Studies* 4(3): 185-208.
- Bleakney, D., & Morrill, M. (2010). Worker education and social movement knowledge production: Practical tensions and lessons. In A. Choudry and D. Kapoor (eds.), *Learning from the ground up: Global perspectives on social movements and knowledge production*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bofelo, M., Shah, A, Moodley, K., Cooper, L and Jones, B. (2013). Recognition of prior learning as 'radical pedagogy': A case study of the Workers' College in South Africa. *McGill journal of education*, 48(3): 511-530.
- Boughton, B. (2013): Popular education and the 'party line', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(2): 239-257.

- Boughton, B. (1997). Does popular education have a past? In B. Boughton, T. Brown and G. Foley (eds.), *New directions in Australian adult education*. Sydney, AU: University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Centre for Popular Education.
- Bowl, M and Tobias, R. (2012). Learning from the past, organizing for the future. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62 (3): 272-286.
- Bowles, S and Gintis, H. (1976) *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Canadian Union of Postal Workers (2009). Instructor training course – phase 2: Facilitator's Binder.
- Carpenter, S and Mojab, S (eds.), *Educating from Marx: Race, gender and learning*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Choudry, A., and Kapoor, D. (eds). (2013). *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Choudry, A. and Shragge, E. (2011). Disciplining dissent: NGOs and community organizations. *Globalizations*, 8(4): 503-517.
- Coben, D. (1998). *Radical heroes. Gramsci, Freire, and the politics of adult education*. New York: Garland.

Cole, M. (2008). *Marxism and educational theory: Origins and issues*. London: Routledge.

Cooper, L and Harris, J. (2013). Recognition of prior learning: exploring the 'knowledge question'. *International journal of lifelong learning*, 32 (4): 447-463.

Daloz, L. A. P. (2000). Transformative learning for the common good. In J. Mezirow (ed.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Flacks, R. (2004). Knowledge for what? Thoughts on the state of social movement studies. In J. Goodwin, & J. Jasper, J. M. (eds.), *Rethinking social movements: Structure, culture, and emotion*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Foley, G. (1999). *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education*. London, UK: Zed Books.

Gordon, J., and Ramdeholl, D. (2010). "Everybody had a piece...": Collaborative practice and shared decision making at the Open Book. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 128 (Winter): 27-35.

Harley, A. (2012). "We are poor, not stupid": Learning from autonomous grassroots social movements in South Africa. In Hall, B.L., Clover, D. E., Crowther, J. and Scandrett, E. (eds.). *Learning and education for a*

*better world: The role of social movements.* Rotterdam, Boston and Taipei: Sense.

Holst, J. D. (2002). Social movements, civil society, and radical adult education. Westport, CT.: Bergin and Garvey.

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (eds.) (n.d), *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex.* Boston, MA.: South End Press.

Kamat, S. (2004). The privatization of public interest: Theorizing NGO discourse in a neoliberal era. *Review of International Political Economy*, 11(1): 155-176.

Kane, L. (2012). Forty Years of Popular Education in Latin America: Lessons for Social Movements Today. In B. Hall, D. E. Clover, J. Crowther & E. Scandrett (Eds.), *Learning and education for a better world: the role of social movements.* Rotterdam, Boston and Taipei: Sense.

Kelley, R. D. G. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The Black radical imagination.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Lynd, S and Grubacic, A. (2009). *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on anarchism, Marxism and radical history.* Oakland, CA: PM Press.

Neigh, S. (2012). *Resisting the state: Canadian history through the stories of activism.* Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Newman, M. (2012). Calling transformative learning into question. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62 (1): 36-55.

Newman, M. (2012). Michael Newman's final comments in Forum on his article "Calling transformative learning into question", *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62 (4): 406-411.

Newman, M. (2000). Learning, education and social action. In G. Foley (ed.), *Understanding adult education and training*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Scandrett, E. (2012). Social learning in environmental justice struggles – Political ecology of knowledge. In Hall, B.L., Clover, D. E., Crowther, J. and Scandrett, E. (Eds.). *Learning and education for a better world: the role of social movements*. Rotterdam, Boston and Taipei: Sense.

Smith, A. (2007). Introduction: The revolution will not be funded. In INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (ed.). *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex*. Cambridge, MA.: South End Press.

Tarlau, R., Zimmerman de Moraes, M., Witcel, E., and Thapliyal, N. (2014). Learning and transformation: An overview of education within the landless workers movement in Brazil. *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, 3(1):18-41.

Thobani, S. (2002). War Frenzy. *Atlantis*, 27(1): 5-11.

- Vio Grossi, F. (1983). Adult education and rural development – some comments on convergence and divergence from Latin America. *Adult Education and Development*. (20): 103-111.
- Von Kotze, A. (2012). Composting the imagination in popular education. In Hall, B.L., Clover, D. E., Crowther, J. and Scandrett, E. (eds.). *Learning and education for a better world: The role of social movements*. Rotterdam, Boston and Taipei: Sense.
- Youngman, F. (1986). *Adult Education and Socialist Pedagogy*. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
- Zibechi, R. (2008). *La educación en los Movimientos Sociales* (Education in Social Movements). Accessed May 12, 2014, from [http://www.foro-latino.org/flape/boletines/boletin\\_referencias/boletin\\_24/referencias24.htm](http://www.foro-latino.org/flape/boletines/boletin_referencias/boletin_24/referencias24.htm)